

SCHOOL CULTURE

What the Research Says

While Academic Reviews focus on systems, processes, and practices, the importance of school culture in improving student achievement cannot be ignored. It is the culture of the school that determines the effectiveness of the systems, processes and practices in bringing about change in the organization and in supporting improved student achievement.

School culture is established by the beliefs and actions of people within an organization (Novick, Kress, et al., 2002). A study of high poverty schools with high student achievement showed that staff members in these schools believe that all students are capable of academic success, and they develop systems of high expectations reinforcing that belief (Virginia Department of Education, 2000).

Strong leadership is essential for raising student achievement. An essential function of the school leader (principal) is to lead the process for establishing a common vision, clearly defined goals, and priorities school improvement (Corallo & McDonald, 2002). Effective principals take an active role in setting high expectations and instructional goals for student achievement (Bamburg, 1994). A study of high poverty schools with high student achievement showed that principals of these schools serve as instructional leaders of the school by being well aware of instructional practices in classrooms, regularly monitoring the progress students are making, and by having “regular professional dialogs” with teachers about student achievement data

(Virginia Department of Education, 2000).

Leadership must extend beyond the principal. Research indicates that it is essential for teachers to share in the leadership of and responsibility for student achievement (Corallo & McDonald, 2002). Principals in successful schools empower teachers as leaders, employ team-building strategies, and provide systems and processes by which teachers work collaboratively to improve student achievement. As a result, all teachers in the school accept responsibility for student achievement (Virginia Department of Education, 2000).

By sharing leadership and responsibilities, focusing on student achievement, and working collaboratively, school staff conduct well-planned and extensive outreach programs to communicate with parents and community members. Doing so stimulates understanding of and support for the school program (Cawelti, 1999). Extending the shared leadership opportunities to the school community encourages the community to share responsibility for student achievement and for improving the effectiveness of the school (Walsh & Sattes, 2000).

What Virginia’ Educational Reform Says

The SOA require each school to have a current philosophy, goals, and objectives that serve as a basis for establishing all policies and procedures (8 VAC 20-131-20). The philosophy, goals, and objectives must be developed with the input of both professional and lay people who

represent the populations served by the school. In addition, the school must consider the needs of the community when creating and reviewing the biennial school plan. This process of developing a shared mission based on a common set of beliefs is critical to establishing a school culture that is conducive to raising student achievement.

Schools are also required by the SOA to promote communications and foster mutual understanding with parents and the community (8 VAC 20-131-270). To accomplish this, schools are expected to involve parents, teachers, citizens, businesses, and community agencies and representatives in the school improvement planning process and in the development of the educational program. Each year, parents and students must be informed of the school's performance expectations for students. In addition, the school must provide parents and the community with an annual School Performance Report Card that includes data related to the academic achievement of students; student enrollment, attendance, and discipline information; the qualifications of teachers; and the accreditation rating of the school.

Specific responsibilities of school staff related to school culture are also addressed in the SOA. As the instructional leader of the school, the principal is expected to effectively manage school operations, monitor instruction, and to involve parents and citizens in the educational program (8 VAC 20-131-210). Teachers are expected to provide instruction in an atmosphere of mutual respect and courtesy, serve as role models, and assess student progress and report such progress to parents (8 VAC 20-

131-220). In addition, support staff are expected to work with the principal and teaching staff to promote student achievement and successful attainment of the school's goals.

SCHOOL CULTURE INDICATORS

Number	Descriptor
SC 1	<u>Learning Environment</u>
SC 1.1	Basing the mission of the school on the shared beliefs and common vision of the members of the school community
SC 1.2	Clearly communicating expectations for student performance to students and parents
SC 1.3	Implementing instructional and organizational practices that reflect high expectations for all students and consideration of the culture and needs of the school community
SC 1.4	Assigning teachers by matching the needs of students with the endorsements and demonstrated strengths of teachers
SC 1.5	Maintaining a safe and orderly environment for learning
SC 1.6	Implementing activities, programs, and services that support and enhance the academic achievement and social development of students
SC 1.7	Structuring school activities, events and special programs to promote high levels of involvement
SC 2	<u>Shared Ownership</u>
SC 2.1	Involving staff, parents, students and the larger community in the decision-making process
SC 2.2	Seeking and using community resources to support the school's improvement initiatives and raise student achievement
SC 2.3	Establishing an organizational structure within the school consisting of teacher-led teams that cut across the school both horizontally and vertically
SC 2.4	Focusing team planning and collaboration on the school's improvement planning initiatives and goals for student achievement
SC 2.5	Implementing programs and activities to involve and assist families in raising their children's academic performance
SC 2.6	Providing opportunities for students to make choices, learn responsibility, and practice leadership skills
SC 2.7	Using multiple communication strategies to disseminate information to stakeholders
SC 3	<u>Continuous Improvement</u>
SC 3.1	Focusing improvement efforts on student learning and achievement
SC 3.2	Basing school improvement initiatives on research-based, field-validated strategies and practices that address the areas identified for improvement
SC 3.3	Identifying and addressing the challenges existing within the school and community that may impede the progress of the school in implementing improvement initiatives
SC 3.4	Allocating and providing sufficient resources to assist and support staff in implementing school improvement initiatives
SC 3.5	Recognizing significant milestones and achievements of the school in moving toward the established goals
SC 3.6	Establishing a process for regularly reviewing and renewing the school's vision, beliefs, and mission to ensure alignment with the culture and beliefs of the school community